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AUTHOR Corey, Kathleen
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ABSTRACT

The curriculum in English as a second language of the Overseas Refugee Training Program, a federally sponsored program designed to prepare Southeast Asian refugees for resettlement in the United States, uses a competency-based model and the format used in the Oregon State Minimal Competencies curriculum. The specialists who developed the refugee training curriculum chose cultural orientation topics that would also develop English language competencies. A standardized regional curriculum, to be used in a number of overseas camps, was developed to address those competencies at three intermediate levels; a separate beginning-level curriculum was developed later. As in the Oregon State curriculum, the active skills of speaking and writing were separated from the receptive skills of listening and reading. After acceptance of the regional curriculum standardization guide, the new curriculum was taken to the various sites for implementation. Since the creation of the curriculum, competencies have been added, deleted, and revised to reflect the changing situation of the refugees and their changing language and cultural needs on arrival. (MSE)

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ESL Curriculum Development in the Overseas Refugee Training Program: A Personal Account

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Kathleen M. Corey
Refugee Service Center, Washington, D.C.

This article provides a personal account of the development of the Overseas Refugee Training Program's competency-based ESL curriculum. The article discusses the history of competency-based education and explains why a competency-based model was chosen. The article concludes with a discussion of the principles that guide ESL instruction in the overseas training program.

Background

Among the first wave of Indochinese refugees to resettle in the United States, many were well-educated professionals who had worked with Americans in their own countries. Many spoke English well and were familiar with Western ways. For the most part, these refugees adjusted to their new country with remarkable success, entering into mainstream America with enterprise and vigor. Within several years these early arrivals had achieved a rate of employment equal to that of the general population.

By 1979 the situation had begun to change, as preliterate Hmong from the hills of Laos, Vietnamese fishermen, and Khmer farmers joined the ranks of the newcomers. Many of these later arrivals had no formal education or exposure to urban life and Western culture. The majority of these refugees spoke no English and many could not read or write their own languages. The rate of employment among newly arrived refugees dropped sharply.

New problems demanded new solutions, and in the spring of 1980, a program, conceived and funded by the U.S. Department of State, was implemented to address problems refugees were facing in their resettlement. The program – then called the Intensive English as a Second Language and Cultural Orientation Program (IESL/CO) – was designed to help newcomers cope with the demands of American society and to raise their level of English proficiency.

It was through this program that in October 1980 I came to Ban Vinai, a Hmong refugee camp in northern Thailand, and one of the sites selected for the program.[1] I had been sent by the Consortium, one of the implementing agencies, to supervise a team of seven Thai ESL teachers. My job was to design daily two-hour teacher training sessions based on my team's instructional needs. I regularly observed my teachers and offered suggestions for improving their classes. I was also designated the ESL curriculum developer at Ban Vinai.

In order to prepare myself for my new job, I had spent several weeks observing various ESL classes, already in progress in Ban Vinai. These classes weren't part of any formal ESL program. They were voluntarily taught by Hmong refugees who had worked with Americans in their own country and whose English was therefore good. The students, who were studying English while they waited to be accepted for resettlement to the U.S., met twice a day – at sunrise and sunset – frequently studying late into the night. The students' dedication to learning another language impressed me, considering that most had never studied in a classroom before. Indeed, most couldn't even read and write

1. The Ban Vinai program closed in May 1981. Hmong refugees now study in the program at Phanat Nikhom.

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their own language – a language that has only recently been given a written form.

The classes gave me much to consider. I observed refugee teachers drilling structures in much the same way my high school teacher had taught me German in 1962: "The book is next to the pen, repeat; the pen is next to the pencil, repeat," and so on. *English 900* – a traditional grammar-based and reading text – was the book that most teachers in Ban Vinai chose to teach from; it was the kind of text they had learned English from. I realized this would probably be the case with the Thai teachers on my team: they, too, would have a propensity for teaching English as they had been taught. I wondered if I could spend a year observing 20-minute grammar drills and lengthy pronunciation exercises.

I pondered many questions as I walked around the camp observing refugee classes: How can we best help these highly motivated people to learn English? How can we best prepare them for their new lives in the U.S., particularly during those first threatening months? Clearly, spending an hour on the third-person pronoun was not going to help them reach a goal of self-sufficiency. Two questions persisted: what will we teach them and how will we do it?

Choosing an Approach

In November 1980, the first regional meeting of representatives from the overseas training programs was held in Bangkok, Thailand. Several models for the ESL curriculum were discussed: structural, notional-functional, and competency-based. Because of the stateside success of competency-based education with refugees, the group opted to use a competency-based model for curriculum development at all sites. Curricula developed in the U.S., such as the *Oregon State Minimal Competencies* and the *San Diego Community College District Competencies*, were used as models.

I returned to Ban Vinai and reported on the meeting to my team of Thai teachers. "What are competencies and how do I teach them?" they asked. "How is this different from a structural approach and where did this concept come from?" To answer these questions, it was necessary for me to discuss the recent history of Adult Basic Education and the trends within the field of language and linguistics that have led to competency-based language education as we know it today.

In the 1970s adult educators were stressing the importance of learner-centered education (Knowles 1973.) They concluded that for effective learning to take place, adults must have their expectations met: they need to know that what they study will improve their lives. Adults generally don't study subjects which someday may be useful; rather, they study subjects that have relevance to their present situations. Historically, subject matter has taken precedence over student needs. Competency-based education, where learning is relevant to students' lives, sought to reverse this trend.

At the same time that new theories of adult learning were being formulated, the Department of Adult Education of the U.S. Office of Education commissioned a study called the Adult Performance Level (APL) project (Adult Performance Level Staff 1977). This study sought to identify the skills necessary for an adult to function successfully in today's society.

The 1971 APL study defined functional coping skills in terms of five knowledge areas (occupations, consumer, health, government, and law), and four basic skill areas (communication, computational skills, problem-solving, and interpersonal relationships). The communication skill was further broken down into four language skills – reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Each of the five knowledge areas had a series of goals stated as task-oriented objectives or competencies.

At the same time that new theories of adult learning were being formulated, and the APL study was being conducted, new insights into language teaching and learning were being explored. The Council of Europe had begun a project to identify the language needed in a variety of social situations by immigrants and visitors to the Common Market countries. They explored how language is actually used, how native speakers express themselves in various situations. This was a dramatic departure from the structural approach to language teaching which focused on language form rather than content. The product of this project was the notional/functional syllabus.[2] (For an in-depth look at the notional/functional syllabus, see Wilkins 1980.)

Another relevant development in the 1970s was the growing popularity of English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses. Courses designed to teach English for Science or Technology and English for Business and Economics were offered to advanced-level students who had special ESL needs. The success of ESP courses sharpened awareness that

2. Notions are the ideas people express and functions are the way in which we express them. Functions are "language acts," what one does with the language, such as apologizing, agreeing and refusing. General notions are abstract time and space relations such as existence/non-existence, or presence/absence, and specific notions are items that are determined by the topic. For example, inquiring about (function) the existence of (general notion) a school (specific notion) is the framework for the sentence "Is there a school nearby?"

adult language learners have special needs and that a well-designed ESL program meets those needs.

The convergence of these factors – findings in adult learning theory, the design of the notional/functional syllabus, the APL study, and the advent of ESP courses – laid the groundwork for competency-based ESL as we know it today. This approach was particularly appropriate to the special needs of the Indochinese population, who needed English for the specific purpose of functioning in a new culture. They needed English to apply for jobs, to describe medical symptoms, and to get help in an emergency. In addition, the low educational level of many of these students argued for a task-based approach. Studying language as a system made up of parts of speech (as in a structure-based approach) or speech functions (as in the notional/functional syllabus) would be difficult for refugees with little or no formal education. Many had not learned to read or write their own languages. A hands-on, task-oriented approach to learning language would approximate how these students had learned non-formally in their own countries.

Choosing the Topics

In December 1980, ESL program representatives met again in Bangkok. The first task was to identify topic areas that refugees would encounter in their first six months of resettlement. We believed that the curriculum should address only initial situations since refugees were generally able to obtain further English training not long after resettlement. We hoped to equip them with language skills that would lessen the impact of entry into an unfamiliar culture.

We looked to the Cultural Orientation (CO) component for guidance in choosing which topics we needed to address. Of the various topics CO chose, only the ones that required English were considered. For example, a topic like Health would require exposure to all four language skills: *comprehending* doctor's orders, *stating* symptoms, *reading* a prescription, and *filling out* a medical history. A topic such as Changing Family Roles requires no English skills, since any discussion on this topic would probably be done in the native language, between family members. The topics that we identified were the following: Classroom Orientation, Personal and Family Identification, Transportation, Food, Clothing, Housing, Employment, Banking Services, Health, and Post Office Services.

In addition, certain cross-topical areas were identified. These were areas that would resurface in many situations. For example, the cross-topical area of Time would be treated within several topics: Health (making an appointment with the doctor), Employment (understanding hours to be worked), and Food (reading supermarket hours). The cross-topical areas were Time, Money, Telephone, Weights and Measures, and Emergencies.

Armed with a list of minimal survival topics, representatives returned to their sites to begin drafting their own competency-based curricula.

Developing a Regional Curriculum

In April 1981, the U.S. Department of State asked the sites to develop a standardized regional curriculum. This was done for two reasons. First, stateside ESL programs were enrolling students who had received different training from different sites : a student from Ban Vinai had not been not exposed to the same material as a student from Bataan. Since refugees from different camps were arriving in the U.S. with varying skills, it was difficult for stateside ESL teachers to design lessons built on the work done in the overseas program. Second, a standardized regional curriculum would enable sites to share materials developed by the programs and by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL).

The group, joined by a stateside consultant from CAL, convened again, this time at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center at Bataan. The meeting was held from June 25 to July 5, 1981. A similar CO meeting had been held the week before so that CO could identify the teaching points and the order in which they planned to teach them. ESL intended to follow the sequencing of topics in CO. The rationale was that it was best to first introduce a topic in CO in the native language to contextualize the situations; the ESL component would then later provide and practice the necessary language.

We decided first to develop an intermediate (B-, C-, and D-) level curriculum guide. We felt that the beginning (A-level) students would require a special curriculum which would be developed at a later time, and that there was an adequate amount of commercially available texts for the most proficient (E-level) students.

We began by focusing our attention on the B-level curriculum. The first task was to decide which competencies were critical for each topic. Once the list was complete, the group identified which competencies were appropriate for the C- and D-levels. When deciding which competencies would be included in the regional guide, consensus was necessary for regional consistency. All sites had to agree to teach all competencies. If one site chose to

add a competency, they were free to, but none could be dropped.

The next task was to sequence the B-level competencies. All participants numbered the 63 competencies in the order in which they thought the curriculum should be taught. From this, we were able to see which competencies naturally fit – or "chunked" – together. These "chunks" provided the basis for the spiraling (that is, the recurrence of material) of the curriculum. For example, one "chunk" in employment dealt with finding a job, another with applying for a job, and a third with keeping a job.

We made a decision to spiral topics and competencies for three reasons: 1) to break the monotony of teaching one subject for too long, 2) to insure review of vocabulary and structures, and 3) to make each new learning task easier. The following example[3] illustrates how the spiraling of competencies facilitates learning.

Money I

1. Students will be able to identify coins and bills by name (e.g., dime) and number denominations.
2. Students will be able to give the correct amount of money upon request.

Food I

1. Students will be able to ask for and locate certain food items.
2. Students will be able to read price labels on items.

Clothing I

1. Students will be able to ask for and locate clothing items.
2. Students will be able to read price tags on items.

Food II

1. Students will be able to read food name labels.
2. Students will be able to make food purchases and verify correct change.

Clothing II

1. Students will be able to express and ask for appropriate size.
2. Students will be able to make clothing purchases and verify correct change.

3. Adapted from the Center for Applied Linguistics, *Teaching ESL to Competencies: A departure from a traditional curriculum for adult learners with specific needs.*

We also decided that to further simplify the learning, the first "chunk" of any topic should be clusters of competencies that refugees can perform in their own language such as "Select and pay for food in a setting familiar to Southeast Asian refugees." The guiding principal became to first introduce concepts in the "here and now," using objects familiar to the refugees, and then recycle the vocabulary and structure later in the "there and then." For example, in the first chunk for the topic Food, refugees role play buying rice and vegetables in the camp market using local currency. The exchange, "How much is the rice?" "It's ten baht," supplied English to familiar concepts. Later in the curriculum such foreign concepts as American money, weights and measures, and shopping in a supermarket were added to the previously taught structures.

Writing the Language

From July 16-18, 1981, a task force met again to write specific language samples for each of the competencies.

As a framework for our curriculum, we borrowed a format used for the Oregon State Minimal Competencies curriculum (see Figure on page 10).

As in the Oregon curriculum, we separated the active skills of speaking and writing from the receptive skills of listening and reading to indicate that not all language needed to be produced. Some language would be taught for comprehension only. For example, although we believed it was necessary for students to respond to the question, "What's your social security number?", we decided that there was no reason for them to produce this question. After all,when would a low-level learner ever ask someone what their social security number was?

The criterion we used for selecting oral/aural language items was: what is the most common way an American in this situation would speak? The criterion we used for selecting reading/writing tasks was: what reading and writing tasks are necessary in order for the student to achieve this competency? Hence, in order to successfully perform the competency "Follow instructions about treatment," the learner needs to be able to read prescription labels.

In our curriculum we focused on survival – rather than developmental – reading; quite simply we didn't think that it was necessary to systematically teach the skill of reading since it wasn't critical to a refugee's survival. However, we did believe that sightword recognition was. It would be essential for a refugee to recognize the difference between *men*

and *women* signs, to understand *emergency entrance*, and respond to *keep out of reach of children*. Writing tasks were similarly rooted in the competency. In the tradition of competency-based education, all writing was task-oriented and focused on a lifeskill, such as filling out a medical history form or employment applications.

The grammatical structure column identifies the structure to be practiced or reviewed within a given competency. We believed that grammar should be an integral part of a competency-based curriculum – that it was necessary to teach our students a system of language that they could manipulate to generate their own language in a variety of situations.

As we worked on this part of the curriculum, we found that grammatical structures are best practiced with certain competencies. For example, the modal *can* is easily practiced with the competency "Describe skills" ("Can you cook, drive, sew?"). When shopping in a supermarket, the students will need to demonstrate mastery of mass and count nouns when they ask for *some* cheese or three *loaves* of bread. The past tense is practiced in a variety of forms when the refugees describe their past work experience in their country.

Varying degrees of structural complexity can be introduced through a single competency. The choice of structures depends on the level of the students. Language in the competency "Explain medical problems," for example, can be learned simply with, "My back hurts," at a low level; it can also be practiced with greater complexity at a higher level with, "I have a cramp in my stomach."

Similarly, different forms of the same language function can be practiced at different levels. The competency "Locate a place" can be performed by simply asking, "Where's the bus stop?" or the more polite (and grammatically more complex) question, "Excuse me, could you tell me where the bus stop is?"

The vocabulary column contains the lexical items to be practiced. The number and difficulty of vocabulary items is determined by the level of the students.

The cultural notes column identifies the cultural skills needed to perform a competency successfully. For example, to interview competently for a job, students must not only be able to ask and answer questions pertaining to the job; in addition, they need to know that our culture places a premium on hearty handshakes and eye contact as signs of self-confidence. Students also need to be aware of the different forms of address used for employers and co-workers. All these points would be listed in the cultural column.

The last column is materials and activities, which lists resources for teaching the competency. These may be texts which can be cross-referenced to the curriculum or activities particularly well-suited to presenting, practicing, or communicating the competency. Items which will help tie the competency to reality (such as job applications, health forms, or plastic food items) are listed here.

The figure on page 6 illustrates how language and cultural skills are specified to attain a competency – in this case, "To ask for and locate certain food items."

After the B-level competencies were sequenced and language items inventoried, the group identified additional cross topical areas. A master list of these areas was established. The list included the following: Locations Outside a Building, Locations Inside a Building, Oral Directions, Money, Time, Clarification, Forms, Personal Identification, and Telephone.

Curriculum developers at each site were free to incorporate the cross-topical areas into the curriculum as frequently as they deemed appropriate for their students. (For example, the areas of time and money were reviewed in Ban Vinai in depth, since low-level Hmong had particular difficulty telling time and using American money.)

The standardization of the regional curriculum guide was accepted. The group agreed to adhere to the following: inclusion of all competencies, sequencing of competencies, language samples to achieve those competencies, and grammatical structures that would enable learners to achieve those competencies.

Guiding Principles

We returned to our sites to discuss the outcomes of the meeting and train teachers in the use of the curriculum. The following principles for using the curriculum and assumptions about language learning/teaching emerged as we were designing the curriculum:

1. *Successful communication is the goal of the curriculum.* Lessons should be sequenced from guided practice activities to communicative ones.

2. *Language practice should be meaningful.* Practice should be communicative and situationally based. "Real" language should be emphasized; classroom language should be kept to a minimum. The curriculum was carefully laid out to ensure that students would only be producing language that would be required of them in real life. Hence, students ask the teacher, "What's this?" or "What's this called in English?" to achieve the competency

Figure: Specifying Language Skills

TOPIC	COMPETENCY	SPEAKING	LISTENING	READING	WRITING
FOOD	-Student will be able to ask for and locate food items	Where is/are the _____? I need some _____	It's / They're in the dairy/meat/vegetable section in Aisle (3)	DAIRY MEAT VEGETABLE PRODUCE	

STRUCTURAL FOCUS	VOCABULARY	CULTURAL NOTES	MATERIALS AND ACTIVITIES
(Review: plural -s) count vs. non-count nouns some, a	oranges carrots lettuce meat fish	-Explain to students which foods must be refrigerated	English for Adult Competency I, p. 32 Notion by Notion, p. 10 Dialogue Repetition & Substitution Drills Role Play

(Adapted from the Center for Applied Linguistics, "Teaching ESL to Competencies." In *From the Classroom to the Workplace: Teaching ESL to Adults.*)

"Find out English for unknowns," and not the other way around, as is frequently the case in the traditional ESL classroom. Similarly, teachers should provide practice in the use of shortened forms. For example, in answering the question "What's your name?" students should be encouraged to practice the short form, "Chue Vang," as well as the long, "My name is Chue Vang."

3. *Language occurs within a social context.* The setting where the communication takes place as well as the social roles between the speakers affect the language used. Extralinguistic features such as gestures and eye contact can also be addressed within the context of various situations.

4. *Teaching grammar and pronunciation is important and can easily be incorporated into a competency-based curriculum.* ESL learners need a basic practical knowledge of the English sound system, grammar, and vocabulary. Student level determines degree of mastery: A-level students will only be exposed to grammatical forms; E-level students should expect some degree of mastery.

5. *Frequently students need to understand language different from what they need to speak or write.* Not all language needs to be produced. Certain words, phrases, or sentences should be taught for listening or reading only.

6. *Language should be spiralled and reviewed.* Since some language will reappear in different competencies, there is ample opportunity for review and reinforcement of structures.

7. *The number of items presented must be carefully determined.* Studies suggest that no more than nine language items should be emphasized at any one time. Low-level learners with no formal education may have difficulty with more than five items. Grammatical complexity and vocabulary should be adapted to the ability of the student to avoid excessive frustration.

8. *Moving from the known to the unknown facilitates learning.* Students should practice English in situations familiar to them before applying English to unfamiliar situations. For example, using language to describe past or camp work experience should be practiced before using English to apply for a job in the U.S.

9. *Instruction should focus on individual needs as much as possible.* There is no need for low-level students to learn all the occupations of their classmates; what they need to learn is to talk about their own occupations and how to describe their own skills and duties.

10. *When a negative response to a question is given, a positive response should follow whenever possible.* For example, a question like, "Do you have a job?" should be answered with "No, but I'm looking."

11. *Not everything has to be or should be fixed.* The curriculum was designed to ensure maximum flexibility. Teachers who feel that their students can handle more complex structures or more difficult vocabulary items should introduce them. Teachers

must constantly assess their students' ability to go beyond the minimum. For example, some classes would benefit most from practicing one-sided dialogues where the students produce only the language in the speaking column. Others might benefit from two-sided dialogue practice where students produce the language in both the speaking and listening columns.

12. *Competency-based ESL allows for the use of a variety of methods, materials, and techniques.* Since adults have individual learning styles, a variety of auditory, visual, or physically active tasks should be included in a given lesson.

Conclusion

Curriculum development in the Overseas Refugee Training Program is an on-going, dynamic process, and the ESL curriculum has undergone several revisions since it was designed in 1981. Competencies have been added, deleted, or given different emphasis based on information from stateside service providers about the changing profile of the resettling refugee. As more refugees are reunified with relatives living in the U.S., tasks once considered important for the refugee to perform independently are now being handled with the help of others. For example, most refugees don't find their own housing, but rather move in with family members already settled. Other competencies have been re-evaluated and found not truly critical for survival. Still, the basic communicative approach within a competency-based framework and the principles behind the approach remain the same today as they were in 1981 and continue to guide ESL curriculum development in the overseas training program.

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***Kathleen M. Corey** is on the program staff of the Refugee Service Center in Washington, D.C. Prior to that, she worked at the Refugee Service Center in Manila as an editor of Passage and as a Program Associate for Materials Services. From 1980 to 1981, Corey worked as a supervisor in the Consortium program in Ban Vinai, Thailand. From 1975 to 1979, she taught EFL in Liberia, in West Africa, and Orizaba, Mexico. She has completed an MAT in ESL from the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont.*